

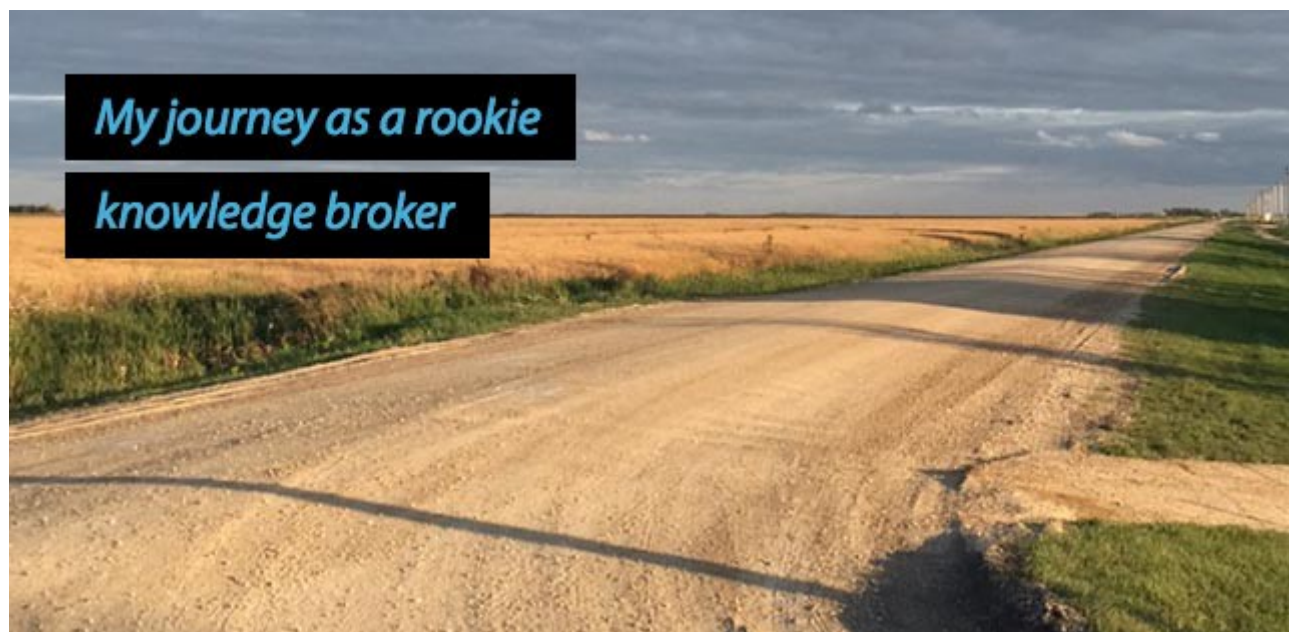
# I got the job!... so, um, what's a knowledge broker?



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Oct 29, 2015 · 5 min read



“I got the job!”

My family and friends celebrated with me, even though they had a hard time understanding — and I had a hard time explaining — what exactly I would be doing as a Knowledge Broker. Being at the final stages of completing my graduate studies, I'd seen how difficult it could be to put research into practice. I had also wondered how my own research could make a meaningful impact and how the findings could be accurately broadcast beyond the walls of the university. But that doesn't mean I had any of the answers to these questions when I stepped into the KT office on day 1.

## What exactly is a knowledge broker??

The practice of KT involves engaging in any of the 4 components of KT: synthesis, dissemination, exchange and application. Specialized KT practitioners are often referred to as “Knowledge Brokers.” *Brokering* has been described as a human force that facilitates the process of knowledge transfer and adoption [1].

Knowledge brokers often work at the interface of research and policy, but can also work amidst research and health care, research and business, research and the public (*patient engagement*) [2]. — or a mix of any of these. In fact, the literature suggests that the role of a KB is complex, contextual, and certainly not cookie-cutter. Because of this, many see the profession as an opportunity for professional self-definition [2].

The rise of the knowledge broker in health services research and practice stems in part from “the increasing focus on research impact, which has promoted the idea that knowledge should be used, useful and have cultural, social or political value” [2]. The need for a role to facilitate this transfer and exchange also stems from the recognition of the numerous barriers that exist when introducing change into the health care system, and also in translating research into practice [3].

### **What skills are needed to broker? And what do they do.... ?**

Similar to there being no one definition of knowledge translation, there is no one definition, skill set or job description for a knowledge broker (KB). The role of a KB is hybrid — they have been referred to as boundary spanners or bridge builders [4,5], and act as a third party to facilitate the transfer of knowledge [4]. Because the role often involves acting as the ‘link’ between people or groups (including the producers and users of research), knowledge brokers need to be able to:

1. relate to people with a broad range of backgrounds
2. understand different ways of thinking
3. understand the different contexts in which information can be used and shared, and
4. be able to critically analyze evidence [2].

### **A day in the life of a knowledge broker**

When you have a position that’s focused on knowledge brokering, expect your days to be quite varied. KBs are said to act in 3 different ways: as knowledge managers, as linking

agents, or as capacity builders [7]. Because of this, we are often involved in a large range of activities, which makes the role difficult to both explain and evaluate.

Given that knowledge brokering is contextual and job specific, I've found that giving concrete examples is often the best way to describe it:

Half of my time is dedicated to the Translating Emergency Knowledge for Kids (TREKK) project, which has forged a national network of pediatric emergency professionals, united by a common goal — to improve emergency care for kids no matter where they live in the country. As a knowledge broker on this project, I sit between clinicians, content experts, data synthesizers, students and managers to facilitate the transfer of vetted synthesized evidence (synthesis) — backed by clinical input and expertise (exchange) — into day-to-day tools (including bottom-line recommendations, evidence repositories, interactive parent tools, etc.), that can be used in the emergency department to inform and standardize care (dissemination and application).

### **From student (academia) to broker**

A few months into the position, I was transitioning from thesis writing to my new career in brokering. This led me from long, detailed writing (which — let's be honest — can sometimes be quite secluding!), to blogging, to short 150 character tweets, to ongoing interaction with a wide range of knowledge producers and users. The literature suggests that few people jump into a career in Knowledge Brokering — instead, many first work in policy, training, or communications [2]. I do feel that my background has enabled me to reach across the boundaries of many fields, allowing me to better understand different ways of thinking and doing. Yet, making the links between these fields can be difficult and take time.

Though there appear to be many different knowledge broker strategies and roles, they all appear to have the same means to an end — to facilitate knowledge transfer and improve decision-making [4]. Given that both the knowledge brokering world and myself are still forging our own paths, I think this year ahead will equip me with many new and unique skills, and an evolving understanding of the role(s) of a knowledge broker. Stay tuned!

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